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ABSTRACT

In 1951 Robert Russa Moton High School in Prince Edward County, Virginia was typical of the all-black schools in the central Virginia county. It housed twice as many students as it was built for in 1939, its teachers were paid less than teachers at the all-white high school, and it had no gymnasium, cafeteria, or auditorium with fixed seats. In April 1951 the students at Moton High School went on strike and asked for help from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's special counsel to persuade their local school board to build them a better school. This event led to a landmark civil rights case that marked the end of segregation in the nation's public schools. This "Teaching with Documents" lesson plan uses four historic documents that deal with this legal case as the basis for its activities. The lesson plan addresses standards correlation; cites constitutional connection and cross-curricular connections; provides four teaching activities; suggests three enrichment/extension activities; notes how to use the lesson for History Day entries; and offers a bibliography/suggestions for further reading. Contains a photograph analysis worksheet. (BT)

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TEACHING WITH DOCUMENTS

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Frontiers in Civil Rights:
***Dorothy E. Davis, et al.* versus**
County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia

Introduction

Arguments presented and decisions rendered in court cases often illuminate, open, and sometimes close frontiers in social history. For example, the arguments presented in school desegregation cases of the early 1950s illustrate how the "separate but equal" doctrine presented in the *Plessy* v. *Ferguson* decision of 1896 virtually closed the civil rights frontier for nearly 60 years. Conversely, the decisions rendered in the desegregation cases opened up that frontier and encouraged the expansion of the civil rights movement in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Background

In April 1951, the students at Robert Russa Moton High School in Prince Edward County, VA, went on strike. Although their protest was intended to persuade their local school board to build them a better school, it actually led to a landmark civil rights case that marked the end of segregation in the nation's public schools.

Moton High was typical of the all-black schools in the central Virginia county. It was built in 1939 to hold half as many students as it did by the early 1950s; its teachers were paid substantially less than teachers at the all-white high school; and it had no gymnasium, cafeteria, or auditorium with fixed seats like the nearby white Farmville High had. Repeated attempts made by Moton's principal and PTA to convince the school board to erect a new black high school were fruitless. So, in the spring of 1951, the students, led by 16 year-old Barbara Johns, took matters into their own hands. They went on strike and asked for help from the NAACP's special counsel for the Southeastern region of the United States.

The NAACP lawyers told the striking students that the only way the organization could commit to getting involved in the students' cause was to sue for the end of segregation

itself. This was a huge step beyond the students' goal of obtaining a new school building! After thinking it over very carefully and gathering the support of their parents, the students agreed to challenge segregation directly. On May 23, 1951, a NAACP lawyer, on behalf of 117 Moton students and their parents, filed suit in the federal district court in Richmond. The first plaintiff listed was Dorothy E. Davis, a 14-year old ninth grader; the case was titled *Dorothy E. Davis, et al. versus County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia*. It asked that the state law requiring segregated schools in Virginia be struck down.

In the spring of 1952, a three-judge U.S. District Court decided in favor of the school board and upheld segregation. On appeal, the case made it to the Supreme Court of the United States and was decided along with three other school segregation cases from South Carolina, Delaware, and Kansas, in *Brown* v. *Board of Education of Topeka*.

The Brown decision marked the end of the "separate but equal" precedent set nearly 60 years earlier in *Plessy* v. *Ferguson*. The court stated that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal," and that school segregation violated the Fourteenth Amendment.

The Commonwealth of Virginia, and Prince Edward County in particular, resisted the Supreme Court's decision. The county closed its public schools from 1959 to 1964 to avoid desegregation.

The Documents

- Exterior View Farmville - Plaintiffs' Exhibits: Photograph filed in *Dorothy E. Davis, et al. versus County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia*, Civil Action No. 1333. http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/ lessons/davis_case/images/ davis_exhibit_1.gif

- Exterior View Moton - Plaintiffs' Exhibits: Photograph filed in *Dorothy E. Davis, et al. versus County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia*, Civil Action No. 1333. http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/ lessons/davis_case/images/ davis_exhibit_3.gif

- Auditorium, Farmville - Plaintiffs' Exhibits: Photograph filed in *Dorothy E. Davis, et al. versus County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia*, Civil Action No. 1333. http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/ lessons/davis_case/images/ davis_exhibit_2.gif

- Auditorium, Moton - Plaintiffs' Exhibits: Photograph filed in *Dorothy E. Davis, et al. versus County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia*, Civil Action No. 1333. http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/ lessons/davis_case/images/ davis_exhibit_4.gif

Record Group 21, Records of the District Courts of the United States, 1865-1991, NARA's

Lesson Resources

- Standards Correlations
- Teaching Activities
- Photograph Analysis Worksheet

Related Lesson:

Documents Related to *Brown* v. *Board of Education* at http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/brown_v_board_documents/brown_v_board.html

Page URL: http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/davis_case/davis_case.html

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Teaching With Documents Lesson Plan: Frontiers in Civil Rights: *Dorothy E. Davis, et al.* versus *County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia*

Teaching Activities

Standards Correlations

This lesson correlates to the National History Standards.

- Era 9 -Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s)
  - Standard 4C -Demonstrate understanding of the Warren Court's role in addressing civil liberties and equal rights.

This lesson correlates to the National Standards for Civics and Government.

- Standard II.A.2 .-Explain the extent to which Americans have internalized the values and principles of the Constitution and attempted to make its ideals realities.
- Standard III.B.1. -Evaluate, take, and defend positions on issues regarding the purposes, organization, and functions of the institutions of the national government.

Constitutional Connection

This lesson relates to the 14th Amendment, primarily the equal protection clause, as well as to the powers of the Supreme Court under Article III of the U.S. Constitution.

Cross-curricular Connections

Share these documents and teaching suggestions with your history, government, and language arts colleagues.

Activities

1. Reproduce the photograph of Moton High's exterior on a transparency. Use this photograph to demonstrate to the students techniques in photo analysis. Give students a few minutes to look at the photograph. Turn off the projector,

and ask them to write down everything they saw in the photograph. After a few minutes, ask students to share their findings. Cut an 8 1/2" x 11" piece of paper into four parts. Place these four parts over the picture so that you can reveal one section of the photograph at a time, keeping the rest of the picture covered. Ask students to look closely at the area that is revealed and describe what they see in the photograph. This will draw their attention to the details of the photograph. After students have had an opportunity to view each section, uncover the whole photograph and ask them how what they now see in the photograph has changed.

2. Divide the students into 3 groups and distribute one of the remaining 3 photographs to each group. Instruct the students to analyze their photograph using the method described above. Ask a representative from each group to describe their photograph to the class.

3. Conduct a class discussion about the photographs using the following questions: When do you think these photographs were taken? Where do you think they were taken? Why do you think they were taken? What might such a collection of photographs have been used for? Explain to students that these images were exhibits introduced by the plaintiffs in the court case *Dorothy E. Davis, et al. versus County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia* to illustrate the differences in the facilities of the white and black high schools.

4. Using the background information, describe the Davis case to the students. Tell them that Barbara Johns, the student who led the strike, was quoted years later as saying "It [suing for the end of segregation] seemed like reaching for the moon." Ask them to assume the role of Barbara Johns and describe what she meant by this statement in a 2-page explanation.

Enrichment/Extension

1. Divide students into 4 groups and instruct each group to investigate the other school segregation cases that were decided by the Supreme Court in 1954 (*Brown* v. *Board of Education of Topeka* , *Briggs* v. *Elliott, Gebhart* v. *Belton,* and *Bolling* v. *Sharpe*). Direct a representative from each group to describe their case to the class. Ask the class to compare the four cases and determine why the Supreme Court decided 3 of them with the Davis and Brown cases and why a separate opinion was issued in the *Bolling* v. *Sharpe* case.

2. The 12-page Opinion of the Supreme Court in *Dorothy E. Davis, et al. versus County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia* is available online from the National Archives. Direct students to read the opinion and write a one-page summary of it. Note: The opinion is available through the National Archives ARC database. To access it, go to http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/basic_search.jsp and conduct a *Digital Copies Search* on ARC Identifier 279110.

3. Additional documents from the Davis case are available online from the National Archives. These include additional exhibits, witness testimony, the complaint filed against the school board, the defendant's answer to the complaint, the original opinion, and the appeal. To access them, go to http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/basic_search.jsp and conduct a *Digital Copies Search* on the keywords "Davis" and "Prince Edward." Encourage students to access the documents for additional information on the case and incorporate it into a History Day project.

How to Use this Lesson for History Day entries:
Supreme Court cases, like the Davis case, lend themselves well to History Day entries. Research for projects in all categories can include interviews with people involved in or affected by the case, court documents, newspaper articles reporting on the case, and editorials expressing opinions about the case. Using information from these sources, a student could develop a performance depicting a courtroom scene, a witness's testimony, or an attorney's monologue. A performance about the Davis case could also focus on the students' strike, or Chief Justice Warren's announcement of the decision (this is described well in chapter 26 of *Simple Justice).* Court cases also offer documentaries a clear timeline and documents from which to quote and suggest images that reflect significant events and individuals. Exhibits offered by both the defendant and the plaintiff in a court case can often be great additions to an exhibit board, as could a timeline illustrating concurrent events. Historical papers that focus on a particular court case can incorporate the words of the plaintiffs, defendants, and judges found in the court documents.

Bibliography/Suggestions for Further Reading:

Armor, David J. *Forced Justice: School Desegregation and the Law.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

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Howard, John R. *The Shifting Wind: The Supreme Court and the Civil Rights from Reconstruction to Brown.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.

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National Park Service. *We Shall Overcome: Historic Places of the Civil Rights Movement.* A National Register of Historic Places Travel Itinerary.
http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/civilrights/index.htm

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Wilkinson, J. Harvie. *From Brown to Bakke: The Supreme Court and School Integration, 1954-1978.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

National Archives Document Citation

1. Photograph No. 21-51E83-CA1333DAVIS(AB); "Exterior View, Farmville," n.d.; Case No. 1333; Dorothy E. Davis, et al. versus County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia, Civil Action; United States. District Court. Eastern District of Virginia. Richmond Division; Records of the District Courts of the United States, Record Group 21; National Archives Middle Atlantic Region, Center City Philadelphia, PA.

2. Photograph No. 21-51E83-CA1333DAVIS(AB); "Auditorium, Farmville," n.d.; Case No. 1333; Dorothy E. Davis, et al. versus County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia, Civil Action; United States. District Court. Eastern District of Virginia. Richmond Division; Records of the District Courts of the United States, Record Group 21; National Archives Middle Atlantic Region, Center City Philadelphia, PA.

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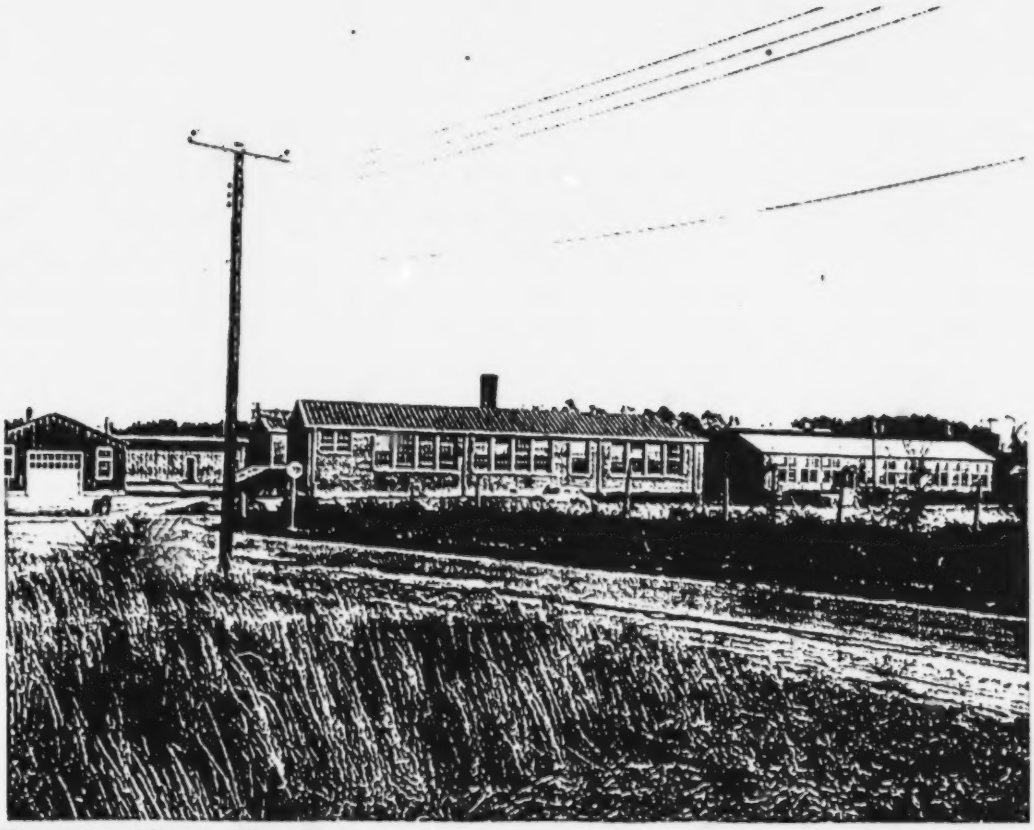
Exterior View, Farmville



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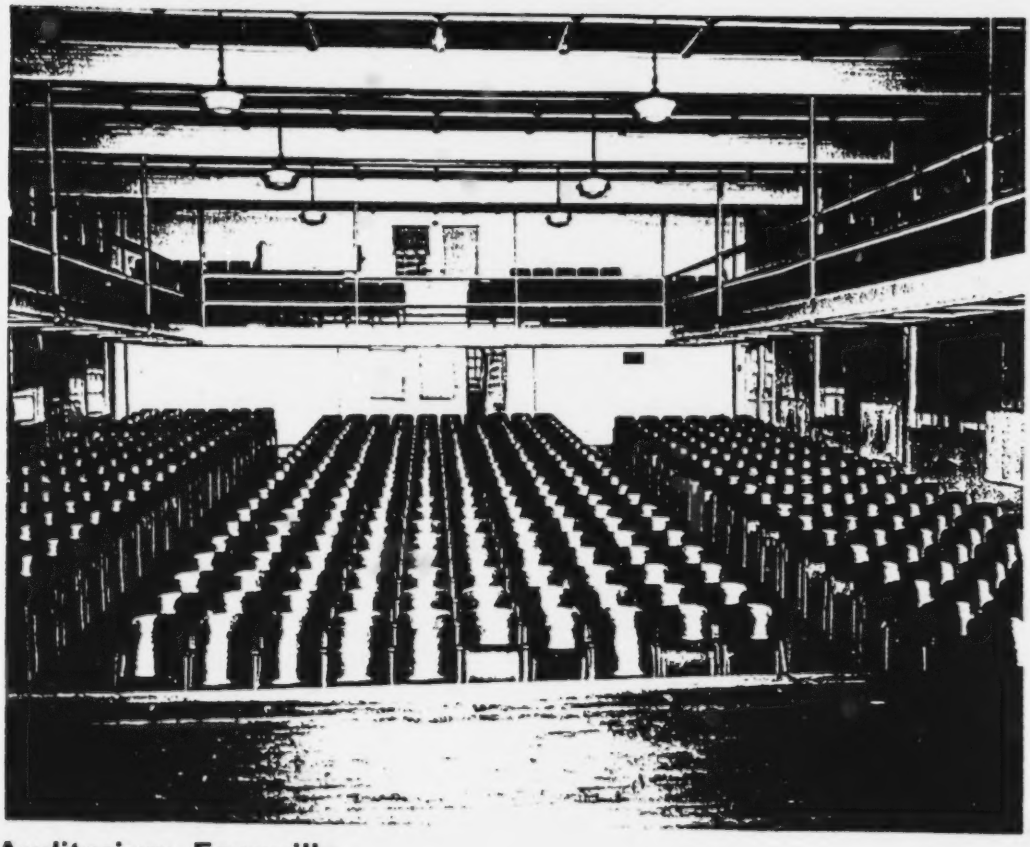
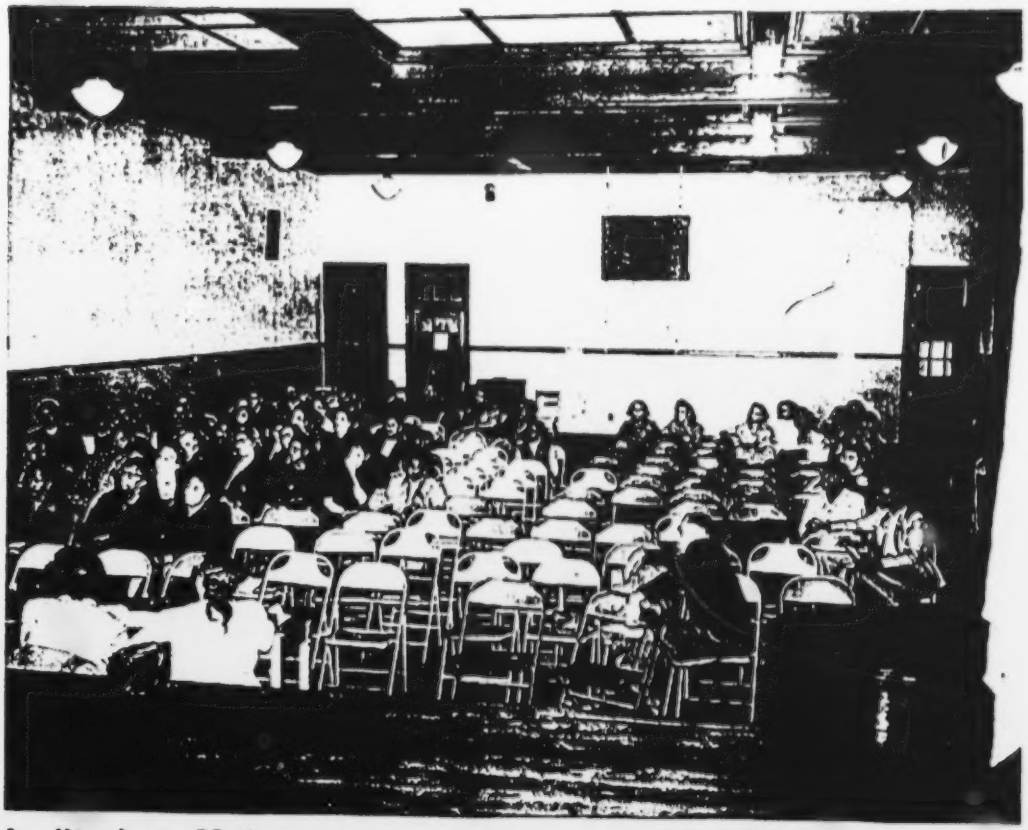


Auditorium, Farmville



Auditorium, Moton

Photograph Analysis Worksheet

Step 1. Observation

A. Study the photograph for 2 minutes. Form an overall impression of the photograph and then examine individual items. Next, divide the photo into quadrants and study each section to see what new details become visible.

B. Use the chart below to list people, objects, and activities in the photograph.

PEOPLE	OBJECTS	ACTIVITIES

Step 2. Inference

Based on what you have observed above, list three things you might infer from this photograph.

_____

_____

_____

Step 3. Questions

A. What questions does this photograph raise in your mind?

_____

_____

B. Where could you find answers to them?

_____

_____

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